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CITY OF HEROES®

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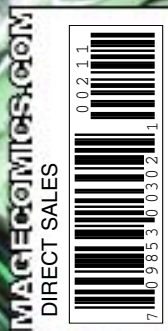
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FRESHMEN™

created by
**SETH GREEN &
HUGH STERBAKOV**

written by
HUGH STERBAKOV

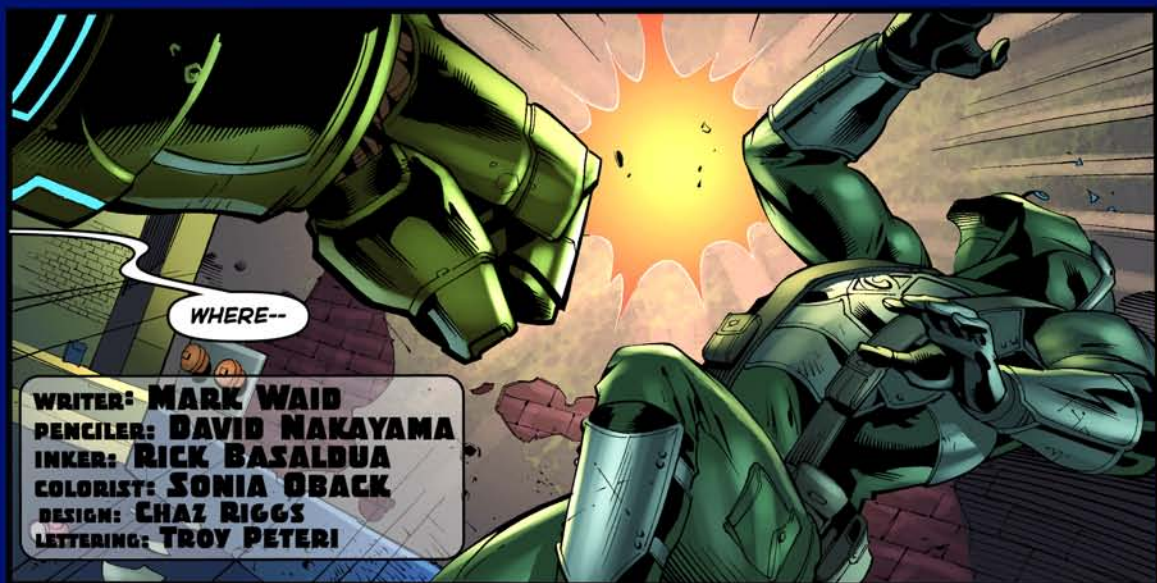
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THIS ISN'T WORKING-- AND
I'VE TAKEN EVERY CHEAP
SHOT THERE IS TO GET
THESE GUYS TO COOPERATE.

I'M SPEAKING, OF COURSE,
OF MY TEAMMATES.

OVER THE LAST 24 HOURS, WE'VE
TURNED PARAGON CITY UPSIDE-
DOWN IN SEARCH OF STATESMAN--
AND MY GUYS ARE BARELY HOLDING
TOGETHER UNDER THE PRESSURE
OF WORKING SANS POWERS.

PROBABLY THE ONLY THING
THAT'S KEPT THEM ALIVE DURING
OUR ROVING INTERROGATION
IS THAT THE BAD GUYS ARE
LIKEWISE WEAKENED, THUS
LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD.

UNDER THESE
CIRCUMSTANCES,
THE ADVANTAGE IN
ANY FIGHT GOES TO
WHOEVER HAS THE
STRONGEST WILL,
AND RIGHT NOW
THAT'S US--

--BUT THAT WON'T LAST. SISTER PSYCHE
IS HEARING VOICES TELLING HER THAT
STATESMAN IS ALMOST CERTAINLY DEAD--

--SYNAPSE, ORDINARILY THE FASTEST
HUMAN ALIVE, IS MOVING WITH ALL THE
GRACE OF A CONSTIPATED RHINO--

--AND POSITRON IS BARELY
HANGING ON INSIDE PATCHED-UP
ARMOR WITH LESS STRUCTURAL
INTEGRITY THAN A '72 NOVA.



SO I MAKE WITH
ANOTHER CONFIDENCE-
BUILDING PEP TALK.

YOU GUYS LOOK LIKE
NINE MILES OF BAD
ROAD. WILL YOU
PLEASE JUST SUCK
IT UP?

I DON'T
CARE HOW
LOW WE'VE
SUNK.

THE FREEDOM PHALANX
IS BACK IN COSTUME,
OUT IN THE CITY AND
TAKING BACK WHAT'S
OURS:



THE
STATUS
QUO.

CLASSIC
ENTRANCE ON
THREE, ONE...
TWO...



THE MANSION BELONGS
TO DAVID ODYSSEUS HILL,
HEAD OF THE WARRIORS
GANG AND DEALER IN
MYSTIC ANTIQUITIES.

HE'S OUR LAST
REMAINING LEAD. IF HE
CAN'T TIP US TO THE
WHEREABOUTS OF OUR
MISSING COMRADE,
WE'RE LOST.

I'M GAMBLING THAT, POST-CRASH, HE WON'T BE IN CONTROL OF ANY DANGEROUS, WILL-SAPPING WEAPONS.

AND IT'S PLAYING VH-1.

OKAY, ODYSSEUS--
TALK. WHERE'S
STATESMAN?

WRONG AGAIN. EVEN AS
WE APPROACH, HE'S IN
COMMAND OF THE DEADLIEST,
MOST MIND-NULLIFYING
MACHINE IMAGINABLE:

COULD YOU
KEEP IT DOWN,
PLEASE?

the
surr
life

STATESMAN, WHAT,
DID THAT IDIOT TRY
TO RESTORE OLD
PARAGON?

YOU
KNOW, THE
CITIZENS ARE
HAPPIER SINCE
OUR BATTLES
ENDED. NOT THAT
I CARE, BUT YOU
SHOULD.

AND YOU'RE
HAPPIER SITTING
AROUND? YOU AND
YOUR BOYS ARE
POWERLESS,
TOO.



"POWERLESS" IS SUCH A RELATIVE TERM. BUT YOU DO HAVE A RUDIMENTARY POINT, HOWEVER LITTLE THOUGHT MUST HAVE GONE INTO IT.

STILL, MY WARRIORS CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS SITUATION--AS COULD YOU, MANTICORE, IF YOU WERE WISE.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT IN A CITY WITHOUT HEROES, A THIRD-RATE CRIMEFIGHTER WHO'S ACCUSTOMED TO FUNCTIONING AS SKILLED BUT NON-POWERED ARCHER IS SUDDENLY A --FORGIVE THE PUN--FIRST-STRINGER.

WERE I YOU, THE LAST ITEM ON MY AGENDA WOULD BE RESTORING THE STATUS QUO.

SO NOTED. AND I'M TOUCHED BY YOUR CONCERN. HEY, HAVE I SHOWN YOU MY NEW ENEMA ARROW?



SUIT YOURSELF. VERY WELL... SINCE IT'S TO OUR MUTUAL ADVANTAGE, THERE'S ONE THING TO TRY.

DESPITE THE CRASH, THERE'S STILL A SMIDGE OF SCRYING MOJO LEFT IN THIS OLD GOBLET. STATESMAN... STATESMAN... WHERE HAVE YOU GONE...?

AH.

POSITRON ISN'T THE ONLY ONE WHO'S HAVING PROBLEMS CONTROLLING HIS ENERGIES SINCE THE CRASH. I SEE THREE OTHERS GATHERED TOGETHER ON PEREGRINE ISLAND.

NOW, I NEVER MUCH LIKED STATESMAN, BUT WHAT IT APPEARS THEY'RE DOING TO YOUR FRIEND...





"...I WOULDN'T WISH
ON MY WORST ENEMY."



STOP
TORTURING
HIM!

DON'T WORRY,
STATESMAN!
WE'RE HERE!
YOU'RE SAFE
NOW!



POSITRON...
NO...





...YOU
IDIOTS!

Whoa...!

THEY WEREN'T
TORTURING ME!
I RECRUITED
THEM!



LIKE POSITRON HERE, THEY WERE UNABLE
TO CONTAIN THEIR ENERGIES POST-CRASH.
I USED THAT! THE PAIN THEY CAUSED ME
ALLOWED ME TO FOCUS MY WILL...

...AND ATTUNE TO A
VERY DIFFICULT AND
VERY SPECIFIC KIND
OF TELEPATHIC
MEDITATION.

A MENTAL LINK,
IF YOU WILL, WITH...
WHOEVER IS
BEHIND THIS.



I LEARNED THAT THE
CRASH WAS ONLY THE
FIRST STAGE OF HIS
PLAN. WE'RE FACING AN
ENTROPY SO DARK AS TO
SERVE AS HIS CURTAIN
OVER THE WORLD.

MY MEDITATIONS
ARE--WERE--THE
ONLY THING HOLDING
HIS EVIL OFF. YOU
WERE NEVER MEANT
TO INTERFERE!



SO YOU WANTED
TO PROTECT US?
HANDLE EVERYTHING
BY YOURSELF AND
LEAVE YOUR TEAM
BEHIND? WHO DO
YOU THINK YOU
ARE, GOD?



YOU'D BE
SURPRISED.



IN 1929, A YOUNG EXPLORER NAMED **MARCUS COLE** DRANK DEEPLY FROM THE LEGENDARY **FOUNTAIN OF ZEUS** AND WAS EXPOSED TO THE POWER OF THE GREEK GODS.

IT WAS HIS...IT WAS MY LAST DAY AS A MORTAL MAN.

THOSE WATERS IMBUED ME WITH ZEUS' **STRENGTH, POWER...**

...AND **SPIRIT.**



Umm...

DEFINE "SPIRIT." YOU...ARE ZEUS?



NOT LITERALLY... BUT IT'S VERY MUCH AS IF HIS POWER LIVES ON *WITHIN* ME.

A GREEK GOD, YOU'RE SAYING.

WOULD THAT I WERE TRULY THAT **ALMIGHTY**, AS LONG AS MY MEDITATIONS KEEP THE COMING ENTROPY AT BAY, I'M TOO WEAK TO FACE ITS **SOURCE**-- LORD RECLUSE, A MAN TIED TO MY OWN PAST.



SO YOU DO NEED US.

I DIDN'T SAY THAT.

IF YOU'RE SO MYTHOLOGICAL, CAN'T YOU DIRECT US TO THE GOLDEN FLEECE OR THE JAWBONE OF AN ASS OR **SOMETHING** THAT CAN REKINDLE OUR POWERS SO WE CAN HELP?

NO. UNLESS...

NO.






PROMETHEUS' FLAME COULD RESTORE US ALL.

I THOUGHT PROMETHEUS WAS A MYTH.

AND ZEUS ISN'T? LET THE MAN TALK.




ACCORDING TO LEGEND, PROMETHEUS STOLE FIRE FROM ZEUS AND GAVE IT TO THE MORTALS. IN RETRIBUTION, ZEUS, WHO HAD NOTHING BUT CONTEMPT FOR HUMANS, PUNISHED HIM...



...TORTURED HIM...FOR THIRTEEN GENERATIONS.

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M ASKING THIS, BUT...IS PROMETHEUS STILL AROUND?



AT THE CENTER OF AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS REALM. HOWEVER, HE ISN'T TERRIBLY INCLINED TO GRANT ME AN AUDIENCE. ALL HE SEES WHEN HE LOOKS AT ME IS ZEUS...

...AND HE HATES ZEUS.

GO FIGURE.



BUT HE DOESN'T HATE MORTALS, RIGHT? WE COULD TALK TO HIM.



ARE YOU READY NOW? THIS MINUTE?

You better *believe* it. So where is this super-secret little fairyland you're taking us to?





AAUUUGH!!

NO! HE'S SEEN US! GET THESE PEOPLE TO SHELTER!



I'VE GOT YOU.

WHAT--? WHAT'S HAPPENING?



WHY IS IT SO COLD?

IT'S PROMETHEUS. HE'S RE-ENACTING WHAT I--WHAT ZEUS DID TO HIM WHEN I ROBBED HIM OF HEAT AND LIGHT. PETULANT BASTARD.

WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

I THOUGHT WE DIDN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT YOU HEROES AND YOUR BATTLES ANYMORE!

YOU HAVE WORSE THAN US TO WORRY ABOUT.



THERE HE IS. SEE THE FIRE?

How do we get to him? you took the @#%* buses away!



IT WAS PRETTY APPALLING, ACTUALLY, HOW QUICKLY WE FELL BACK INTO OLD PATTERNS.

LIKE MORONS, WE TURNED TO STATESMAN FOR TEAM GUIDANCE DESPITE HIS NEWFOUND INABILITY TO WORK AND PLAY WELL WITH OTHERS.

IT'S ME PROMETHEUS IS AFTER! IF I DISTRACT HIM--



--YOU'LL BREAK UP THE BAND AGAIN. FORGET IT.

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU LECTURED US ON NEVER SPLITTING THE PARTY DURING AN ADVENTURE? WE STAND TOGETHER!

GOOD ARGUMENTS. I WAS READY TO STEP IN AND ADD MY TWO CENTS--



--BUT THE NEXT DECISION WAS TAKEN OUT OF OUR HANDS BY A GIANT CLAW.





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PRESTO. WHATEVER HEROIC
MOMENTUM TEAM MORALE HAD
TAKEN FROM FINDING STATESMAN
WAS BLOWN AWAY BY THE FLAP
OF ENORMOUS WINGS.

IT WAS ALL JUST TOO MUCH.
POSITRON WAS LEAKING
LIKE SUNLIGHT THROUGH
A SCREEN DOOR--

--SYNAPSE WAS
JUST EXHAUSTED--



WE HAVE
TO RUN!

No! Hit it
with *this*!

BUT--

Listen
to me!

--AND WORST OF ALL, THE
CONSTANT BICKERING OF THE
TWO VOICES TRAPPED IN
SISTER PSYCHE'S HEAD HAD
ALL BUT PARALYZED HER.

IT HAD DEGENERATED INTO
A CRUEL CONTEST TO SEE
WHO'D DIE FIRST--

--AND MOST
HORRIBLY.



HNNGH!



AND I GOT OUT OF BED THIS CENTURY THINKING IT WAS GOING TO BE BORING...

HAIL, ENEMY, WELL MET! WHAT FOOLISHNESS BRINGS YOU HERE?

ACTUALLY, I...HEHNGH! ...I CAME TO ASK YOU A FAVOR...



I HOPE IT WAS TO DIE SLOWLY, IN AS MUCH PAIN AS POSSIBLE."

I BELIEVE THE PEONS CALL THAT A "WIN/WIN."

AND WITH THAT REMARK, SISTER PSYCHE PROVED MY FEARS ABOUT HER DECLINING SANITY WERE TOTALLY JUSTIFIED.

Hey! You up there! Who you callin' "peons"?

STATESMAN'S NOT YOUR ENEMY! HE KNOWS YOU WERE RIGHT TO STEAL THE FIRE! AND HE KNOWS WE NEED IT AGAIN--FAST!

BECAUSE ONLY A CRAZY WOMAN WOULD MOUTH OFF TO A GOD LIKE THAT.

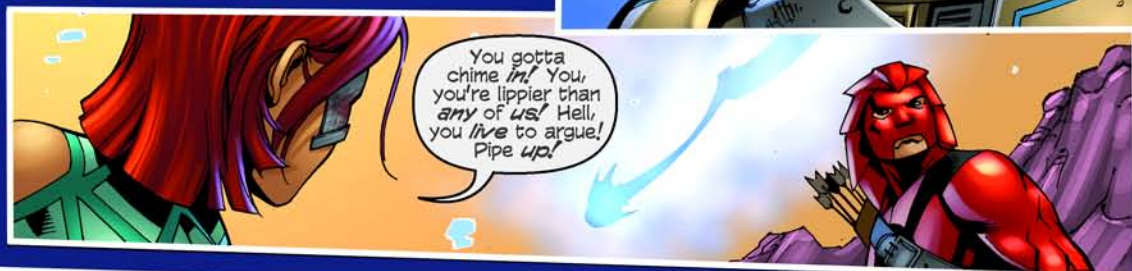
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU? ALL YOU CARE ABOUT NOW IS GETTING EVEN?

Didn't you used to care 'bout us "peons"? Damn it, Prometheus, I'm a mortal--

--AND I'M COLD!

WHO ARE YOU TO SPEAK TO ME LIKE THIS? WHO STARTED YOU HUMANS ON THE ROAD TO CIVILIZATION ALL THOSE MILLENNIA AGO?

YOU'RE NO MYSTERY TO ME! I WATCH YOU! I KNOW YOU! AND I'VE SEEN HOW POORLY YOU CHOOSE YOUR ALLIES!





MANTICORE--

JUSTIN--!

PROMETHEUS,
DON'T LISTEN
TO HIM! HE'S
JUST BEING
PETTY!

HE'S
SELLING US OUT
TO FEED HIS EGO!
I DON'T BELIEVE
YOU, MAN!



ZEUS WAS
CORRECT ABOUT
ONE THING. THE
EVIL YOU'RE FACING
IS INDESCRIBABLY
DARK.

I WOULD HELP
YOU, IF ONLY FOR
SENTIMENTAL REASONS--
BUT I'M NOT TERRIBLY
DISPOSED TOWARDS SO-
CALLED HEROES WHO
WOULD CALL ZEUS
THEIR FRIEND.

IF YOU'VE
NO OTHER
ARGUMENTS TO
PROVE THAT YOU'D
THROW YOUR LOT IN
WITH ME RATHER
THAN HIM, THEN
WE HAVE NOTHING
MORE TO DISCUSS.

GOOD LUCK WITH
ARMAGEDDON.



THERE.
HAPPY?

NOW...
PONY UP,
TORCHY.

TO BE
CONCLUDED...



Art by Larry Dixon

Special Fan Fiction Ch-ch-ch-changes

By Mercedes Lackey

The name on the ticket said "Bella Dawn Parker," but Dr. and Dr. Parker's little girl Bella existed now only in scrapbooks and photo-albums and the Bonanza High School Yearbooks, where Bella's blue hair and skin were unusual, but by no means extraordinary. Her graduating class had included Tommy Shane, who was surrounded by a permanent aura of shadow, Violet Running Deer, who could power the entire school in the event of a power failure, Sam Begay, who could channel the Great Thunderbird, Fred Saltzberger, as bright red as Bella was blue, who tended to break out in stone armor—

No, she wasn't alone at Bonanza, nor for that matter, in Las Vegas as a whole. Super-powered heroes didn't stand out in a city like Lost

Wages, where you could stand waiting for the bus next to a Russian acrobat, a seven-foot-tall transvestite in Cleopatra drag, a guy with an albino anaconda wrapped around his shoulders, and five Elvii (the plural of Elvis) and all anyone wanted to talk about was the football scores. It was a good city for a mutie like her to grow up in, where blue hair and blue skin and the ability to manipulate radiation were cool and assets and not the possible indicators of being a biohazard, or worse. . . .

Continued page 3



Heroic Visions: Fan Art

Fantastic fan art from the City of Heroes Community.

Page 6

HELP WANTED!

The Paragon Times need you!
see page 8

www.cityofheroes.com

Hero Spotlight: Manticore

Paragon Times Exclusive – Aiming for the Center: From the Private Log of Manticore

Page 2

The Paragon Funny Pages Featuring the art of Tim Buckley



Page 7

Hero Spotlight: Manticore

"Sister Psyche was asking questions again today. I didn't answer of course. I think the reason that talking to her makes me so uncomfortable is that she could just take the answers out of my head. I'm not sure why that makes me want to keep things from her, but there it is. Maybe it's just because she is so snarky. The questions were mostly about my past: where I came from, how do I train and all that nonsense. Anyway, she got me feeling...pensive.

I remember growing up in Paragon City. It was a strange place to me back then. I didn't really understand the ins and outs. I suppose that's why I threw myself into my training so hard. That and Miss Bowman. She drove me to excel, to channel the confusion and anger I felt into something positive. It didn't feel like a legacy yet, it was just a distraction from the pain.

It's funny, because I don't remember the first time I saw the suit. You would think something that...elaborate...would stick in my mind. When Miss Bowman finally explained the whole story, my father being Manticore and that a shape-shifting scumbag called Protean killed him and my mother; I remember having lots of questions. What's it made out of? A special metallic alloy. Why did he leave it to me? A legacy of blood. How come there is so much yellow? That is gold, young man! If it's a Manticore, where's the stinging tail? That last one was the easiest, she just handed me the bow... I think putting on the suit is still the best answer I have found to any of my questions. No, that's not disturbing, why do you ask?

The basics of my training regimen are still based in those rituals I learned as a child. Strengthen the body, but keep it flexible. Never allow your focus to waver. Encourage your opponent to make mistakes. Always aim at the center of the target. Sometimes I think I've changed a lot but I suppose at the core, where it counts, I am still as driven as ever to perfection. There is only one bull's-eye. As an archer, I am unmatched...just ask me. My hand-to-hand combat skills are adequate and I can cobble together an arrowhead if I have to. I prefer to buy them though. Speaking of wise purchases, life has certainly gotten more interesting since I bought into the ability to tap the Emergency Network. Being able to teleport myself and my arrows has really opened up my options in combat.



These new kids running around the city are getting good. The other Phalanx members are trying to convince me that we can start getting back into action more often ourselves. They're right, but I need to make them work for it. We still have a responsibility to make sure newcomers get some direction; let's face it, we'll always be the old timers. Some of us more than others, I suppose. Even I have to admit that the city couldn't have asked for better response after the war. Some of those who were total green horns as little as a year ago are now rivaling States in power. I just hope they have his sense of responsibility as well. Speaking of newcomers, these Kheldians make me nervous. It sounds like a big happy family, sharing forms and all. I have seen what that did to Sister Cranky though and I am here to testify, sharing brains is bad.

I am glad to see the Arenas finally getting up and running. I was pushing States and little Ms. L for training grounds for months. They felt it important to open the contract for bid. Ah, Capitalism, nothing like it. I guess I can't complain too much, considering how much money my parents left me, but I really hope that not having final say on safety protocols doesn't bite us on the tail. In the end we needed them though, so I'm glad they're active.

Brickstown has been quieter lately, too quiet for my paranoid tastes. I've been getting whiffs of

something being planned at the Zig. I don't think it's going to happen anytime soon, but when it does I have the feeling we won't be very happy about it. The Council's move on the Column still has me troubled. It was smooth, I will give them that, but their connection to Arachnos and Recluse makes me edgy. The way I see it, Recluse has the same power potential that Statesman does, with none of the filters. Now that is a disturbing thought. All my research so far leads me to believe that this Center fellow is at odds with Recluse; I hope that doesn't change. I tried bringing it up with Statesman again, but he is stubbornly close-mouthed about his connection to Recluse. I don't know if there is a more complex fellow out there than our States. Dark past, shining example, hope

for the future...all this and more is true, if Statesman is right...in the head. There is no denying that when he is on his game he's the best of us, but there are times when I worry about what he has wrapped up in that skull of his. I guess I shouldn't be shooting arrows in the glass house that is my subconscious, but then again I'm not the pillar that Paragon City is leaning on.

I have to hand it to the big guy though; I doubt anyone else could have rallied this kind of support to the City. If the younger heroes keep on getting better at the gig, I will be able to focus my attention on more personal goals and that would be a... perfect shot."

Ch-ch-ch-changes

By Mercedes Lackey

continued from page 1

She'd thought about taking a plane to Paragon City, then thought better of the idea. Not that she didn't like flying—she loved flying and she dreamed, hoped, even prayed that one of these days another of her unknown powers would turn out to be flight. Just—she had decided that she wanted to see something of the country before she got locked down, and trains were the way to do that. After the Rikti invasion, rail service had experienced an upsurge, in no small part because when your method of transport was shot out of the sky, you were sure to die, but when it was on the ground, you at least had a chance of survival.

Mom and Dad had sprung for one of those little private compartments. Now she was glad they had. Maybe they had already known once she got out of Vegas, the stares, the avoidance, and worst, the fear in some peoples' eyes would begin. Oh, the little Air Force Badge she wore did help; everyone recognized the Air Force "Special Civilian Service" star given to volunteers of the Rikti War, but you had to get close enough to see it, and a lot of people didn't. Mom and Dad had insisted she wear that too, and a good thing. It kept the hassles to a minimum.

But the Observation Car was good. And the conductors, who were all friendly, made sure she got good seats there and in the dining car. One of them had lost one of his Army sons to the Rikti, and she had spent a lot of time talking to him about it—well, not talking, listening really, but that was part of being what she was, she had come to find out. There was a name for it, a class, actually, of heroes that did medic and that kind

of support work. "Defender," they called it. She liked the sound of that. She liked it a lot.

Gramma and Grampa Parker liked it too—funny thing, her being the first in three generations not to go to college. Gramma and Grampa had worked for Oppie—Robert Oppenheimer—out at the Nevada test site, on the first atomic bombs. They'd met there, in fact, and later, when their son Robert had gone to work at Groom Lake—what most people called "Area 51"—he'd continued the tradition of finding romance at work by meeting and marrying Bella's mother. Gramma said once that while seeing her daughter-in-law giving birth to a bouncing blue baby had been a little disconcerting, it hadn't exactly been unexpected—well, the number of "Talented" kids at Bonanza who had parents working at Groom was pretty high.

This was the last leg of the long trip to Paragon City, and she was spending it in her little cabin rather than the Observation Car. That was partly because there wasn't a lot to observe, and partly because she was tired of being the one being watched.

She leaned against the window, and wondered what the darkness out there hid. The East Coast, she'd heard, had been hard hit. Nothing near as bad as Paragon, of course, but Las Vegas itself had hardly suffered at all. The Rikti had, purely by accident as far as anyone could tell, taken out exactly one hotel/casino—a brand new one called "The Interplanetary" that had had a science fiction theme—and the only reason that anyone could think of that they'd hit it was because it had looked like a grounded spacecraft to them.

She had her headphones on, and the MP3 player Dad had loaded up for her going—an Archos Jukebox, very cool, her going-away present. Mostly classical, mostly Russian, actually, but the whole David Bowie library too, and a lot of New

Wave stuff he and Mom collected that she liked. Bowie's "Changes" was playing right now, and it seemed like an omen—

"Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes..."

She was going to have to be very different from the Bella Dawn she had thought she was going to become when she'd graduated from Bonanza. She'd never wanted to be a hero, just a paramedic. . . .

She felt the brakes being applied. They were pulling into the station, and just as she turned off the player and tucked the earbuds in her pocket, the conductor knocked on her door and opened it. "Paragon City, Miss Parker," he said, with a smile. "You'll be at something they call the 'Intake Hub'—it's the train station, it's the interstate bus terminal and there's a tram line to Atlas Park and the Airport there too. And Taxibots—"

She blinked at that last. "Taxibots?" she faltered.

He laughed. "You'll see. Just go to the Registration Desk, they'll take care of everything."

She hoped so. Now, more than ever before, she was feeling very alone.

That feeling lasted right up to the point where she got off the train and into the Art Deco Revival terminal. That was when it ended.

There were three girls about her age chattering away like old friends; a tiny honey-blond with short, shaggy hair, a medium sized brunette, and a tall, platinum blond in a red cowboy hat. All of them had luggage, and the person they were chattering to was—

Good heavens.

He spotted her. He was tall, very tall, and built like Li'l Abner from the Al Capp comic. And green. It looked like he was made of green rock. He waved to her.

"Come on over!" he said cheerfully.

She hauled her suitcase over to him and looked up—and up—at him. "Um. Hi? Are you from the city?"

He laughed. "No, not officially. I'm Jade Empath, and I like to come down here when I have a few minutes and meet the newbies and help them get settled in. I came in with a bunch of friends and it was a lot easier doing it that way. Though you—" he looked down at her and spotted the star badge on her arm. "Not such a newbie. This is Valeria Victrix, this is her sister Vic, this is Tex Larimie."

"Bella Dawn Parker," she said, feeling a little better now that she wasn't standing in a strange terminal alone.

"Ahre you gonna use that as your handle?" the Texan drawled. "Val and Vic ahre plannin' on usin' their real names, but ah'm callin' mahself TexArcana, an account'a ah'm a magician."

"Uhm—I was going to call myself Belladonna," she said, hesitantly.

Jade Empath consulted a PDA and shook his head. "Taken. Try a variation?"

She thought. This guy had clearly named himself after his power. So far as she was concerned, her main powers, the ones she was most proud of, were all Auras. "Belladonna Aura?"

"Good." He did something to the PDA.

"There, reserved, no one can take it. Come on



over to the desk and start your interviews."

She was the last in line, and Jade Empath had already shown the others off to the tram—they already had apartments rented, but Tex was overjoyed to discover that she didn't. "Ah need a roomie!" she exclaimed gleefully, and wouldn't hear a word against it. Not that Bella was going to say anything—she already liked Tex, and figured they would work out just fine together. So now she had a place to stay, and the address for it—

Just one last hurdle.

The gray-haired woman at the desk was very kind-looking, and asked her all the pertinent details to register her with the Paragon City Provisional Authority as a deputized hero, starting with asking her if she had reserved her "hero name."

"Jade Empath said—" she began, and the woman chuckled.

"Does half my work for me, that boy—you would have to be the last on his list, Belladonna Aura, right? And I don't think I need to ask you to actually demonstrate your powers—" there was a shrewd glance at the badge again—"but can

you tell me what they are and why you decided to come here?"

"They say I'm a Defender, and I—I control radiation," she said carefully. "I have a healing aura, and that was all I had for a long time, I thought I would be a paramedic and my folks thought that was pretty cool, but then—then the Rikti came—"

The memories came flooding back. The frantic cell-phone call from her Mom, the code-phrase they had set up, but never thought they would have to use, that meant something had gone horribly wrong and she and Dad and the scientists on their team were blockading themselves into the old Cold War fallout shelter at the back of their lab. News reports of a spaceship taking out that new hotel/casino. Her jumping on her motorcycle and screaming out to Nellis AFB, about to fling herself at the nearest officer and demand—what, she wasn't sure, but she was intercepted—intercepted!—by a flying Air Force hero who said he was calling for super-powered volunteers to mount a counter-attack on an alien invasion force at Groom Lake. Two teleports—her first experience of that!—and she was there—

"And I guess you know about the Area 51 attack—"

Everyone wanted to know, where are the real heroes? And that was when they got some of their first views of what was happening around the world, and worst, at Paragon City. Her first views of the Rikti—

"—and I signed on as a paramedic—"

That was all she was supposed to be, in the motley crew of retired heroes of Freedom Phalanx and baby heroes like Sam, and a few come out of the woodwork, who knew from where. Heal and patch up. Except that as the combat continued and the bodies started to pile up like cordwood and she saw one friend after another die, she couldn't take it anymore and something happened—

"—but I guess it was the stress and all of a sudden, I could do new things. I got some kind of radiation blast, and a way to make my team faster and stronger and recover quicker, and something that makes the bad guys easier to hit, weakens their armor or forcefields or something—"

Her mouth was saying those words, but her mind was overflowing with those memories now, and she couldn't stop them, all those things she hadn't wanted to think about, Vi lying in a crumpled heap, only half of Fred visible under a pile of crushed machinery, and the anger and the fear and the terrible, horrible grief bursting out of her like the radiation that was suddenly as much a weapon as it was a balm—

She was crying, crying now, and she couldn't stop. Crying for Fred, for Vi, for Iron Hawk the Navaho superhero from the old days, for that Air Force guy called Top Gun who had been one of the first dead, just shot out of the air to land at her feet, for people she knew and people she didn't and people she had only met half an hour before—

The old lady came from behind the desk and put her arms around her, gave her a box of Kleenex, and let her cry. And when she finally stopped, brought her a cola and a cold, wet washcloth.

"Will it help to know you aren't the only kid I've had fall apart in this office?" she asked quietly, but with a faint smile as Bella wiped her face and her eyes. "Not by a long shot. Not all with that badge—but sometimes I wonder if what drives people to become heroes here isn't as much a lot of pain as anything else—"

She shook her head, and went back to the paperwork, and finally, after a trip into the back, handed Bella an ID card that looked like it was engraved on some sort of metal, and took what Bella recognized as an RFID tag implanter out of a cabinet. "This is mandatory, I'm afraid," she said apologetically. "The chip monitors your health, and if it falls below a certain point, if there isn't another means of revival nearby, activates the Portal system to send you to the hospital." She grimaced. "I'm sorry you didn't have that at Groom Lake—but it's experimental—"

Bella shook her head. "No, it's okay, I understand." The woman went around to her back; there was a thud as if someone had hit her under the shoulderblade, and a hiss and a brief sting.

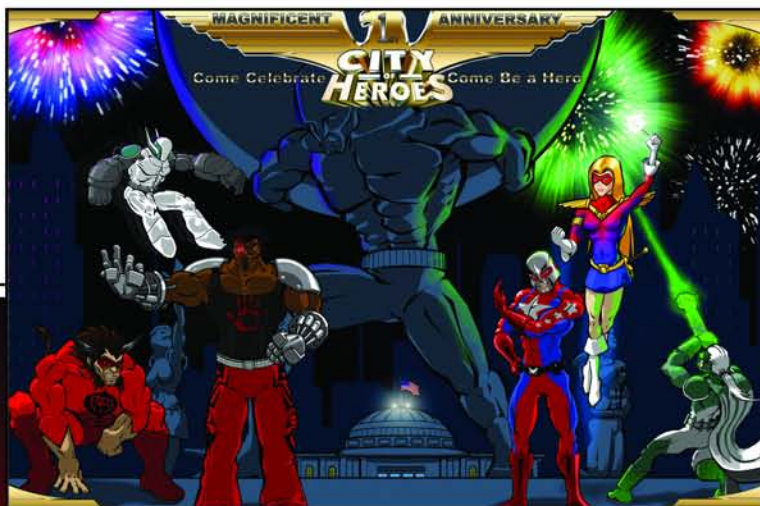
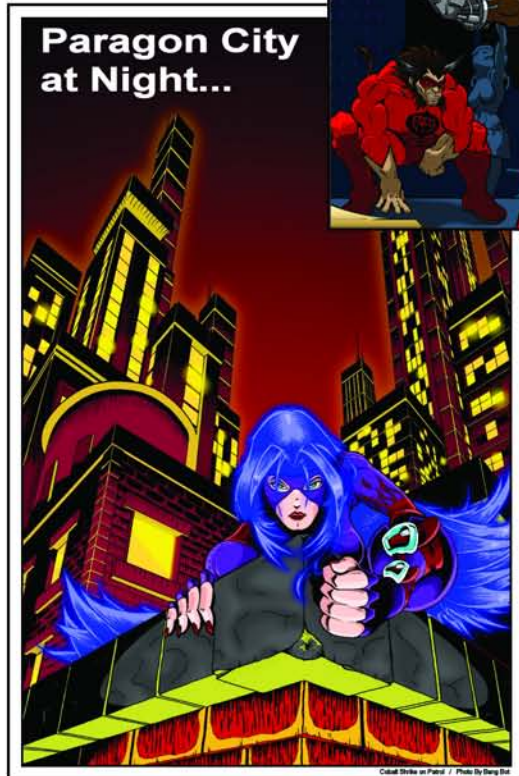
"There you go. Your paychecks will come straight to your bank account which is tied to your ID card, everything else will come to that address you gave me. Go to the Outbreak Icon store to get your first costume, then go on to Outbreak to train in our methods, and you will be as ready as any other hero to hit the streets." The woman smiled slightly again. "Are you going to be all right?"

She thought about Jade Empath, who had promised to introduce her to his "high level friends" as soon as she got in and unpacked. About Tex, who had sworn there would be a pot of chili waiting on the stove when she got to the apartment. About Vic and Val, who seemed both so much younger and so much older than she, but who, she sensed, were going to be good friends too.

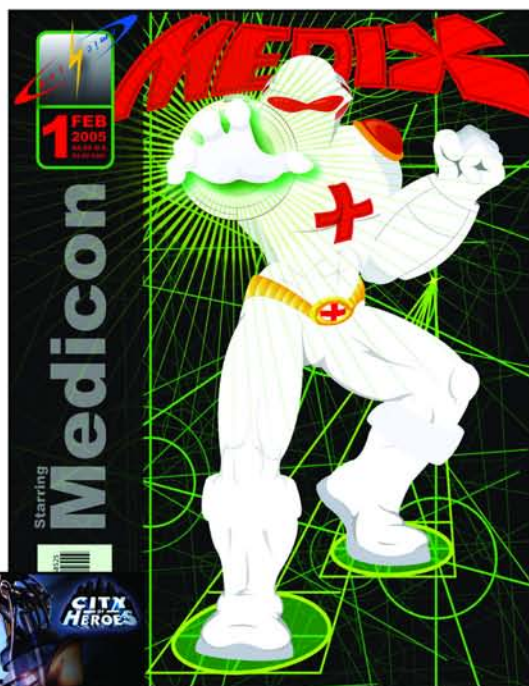
She nodded. "Yes," she said simply. "I think I am."

Heroic Visions: Fan Art

Paragon City at Night
by Paul Hardy



City of Heroes 1st Year Anniversary
by Nate Hallinan



Medicon
Art by Chris Palmer



Everyday People
by Jennifer A. Vodvarka

UNDERWEAR ON THE OUTSIDE

BY TIM BUCKLEY



The Paragon Times Needs You!

Fan Art & Fiction Submission Guidelines

The Paragon Times Submission News Article Guidelines

News items should be short, no more than 200-250 words in length, with appropriate screenshots (no more than 3) if available (highly recommended though). Interviews, features and general articles should be no longer than 500 words. NPC interviews or op-eds should be between 100 and 150 words. Photo-essays should include no more than 4 screenshots in jpg or tiff formats with appropriate captions. The deadline for any specific issue is the 15th of each month.

Selected work may appear under your real name or an appropriate "journalistic" pseudonym. Written submissions will be accepted only in .doc/.txt formats. All submissions, questions and queries should be emailed to cohsubmissions@plaync.com. Please put "Community News Article" in the subject line.

Good luck! We're looking forward to seeing your contributions!

Heroic Scribes Wanted!

Time to dust off your trusty word processor and spin a heroic tale of fan fiction for possible posting or publication in a future community project (including web and comic book). What we want to see is a story that chronicles your hero's or team's (in-game or original characters) villain-busting adventures. Be as creative as you want, but keep it at least PG-rated. Doc or .txt format preferred. 1500 words max, please! Sending screenshots and/or original art for your fiction is recommended. Please send all submissions to cohsubmissions@plaync.com with the subject heading "Fan Fiction Submission." The by-line can be your real name or a character name (or both).

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We aren't leaving you artists out of the fun either, so here's the deal. Send us your best City of Heroes-inspired artwork. Any original medium is acceptable (pen & ink, digital, oils, etc.) as long as you keep it on a family-friendly level. Do not send us nudity or other objectionable images. Let us know if you want credit under your real name or a character name. Selected artwork will appear in a future City of Heroes community project (including site gallery or comic book). Images should be in JPG format. The full image should be between 100 x 100 and 2000 x 2000 pixels and be less than 380KB in size. We may also ask for a higher resolution (300dpi) image in .tiff format – so make sure you save a high-resolution version of your submission! Please send submissions to cohsubmissions@plaync.com with the subject heading "Fan Art Submission."

If you have any questions regarding these submissions, please drop a note to cohsubmissions@plaync.com. We are looking forward to seeing your stories and art!

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